

DEATH BY CUDDLE *Club*

A Dix Dodd Mystery

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Chapter 1

AS A THANK you gift, my mother sent me pastries. Isn't that sweet? Oh, wait, did I say *pastries*? No. Not pastries. That's what a normal 70-year-old woman might do. Yep, a normal mother would send her culinarily challenged PI daughter yummy treats as a thank you for getting her out of trouble in Florida. For saving the diamond my father gave her (AKA, the family jewels). And — let us not forget — keeping her 70-year-old butt out of jail on a trumped-up murder rap. But Katt Dodd will never be accused of being normal. What she sent me were *pasties*. Yep, stick-'em-on, twirl-'em-round pasties. (Well, I couldn't get my twirl on, but I could get a pretty good sway thing going.) Bless her skinny-dipping little ... heart.

Yes, so, post-Florida, I was now the not-so-proud owner of be-tasseled hot pink pasties. Ah, a wardrobe fit for a queen. A *drag* queen. Not quite so appropriate for a professional, 40-ish, amazing-yet-modest private detective. Possibly the most amazing private detective in all of Marport City, Ontario.

Okay, so I'm not so modest.

And yeah, maybe not everyone saw it that way, especially not the guys back at Jones and Associates — the good ol' boys club where I used to work. But, hey, they'd bet — openly — that I'd never make it on my own. That I would be out of business within a very few months, and would come back crying on their doorstep when I landed on my ass. Well, I've shed a few tears in these past months, but none over them, and sure as hell none on their cruddy doorstep. I guess they don't know how well-padded that ass of mine is!

Wait, that didn't come out right.

I did mention I'm 40, right? I've got my fair share of padding there.

But what the hell — isn't 40 the new ... 40? I wouldn't exactly call me a cougar, though some would. Actually, some do. How I love them

all the more for it!

This would probably be a good time to mention Dylan Foreman, PI in training. Smart, sexy as sin — and OMG, so handsome! Tall and lean, but plenty wide at the shoulders and narrow at the hips, just like I like them. (Or high, wide and handsome, as my mother would say.) Thick, dark brown hair, chocolate brown eyes. And all of 28 years old. He'd been my apprentice since shortly after I hung up my shingle in the dilapidated rental office building on the outskirts of town. My friend since day one. And lately, dangerously close to a friend with benefits.

Yes, Dylan had joined me back when I was in that tiny, grungy suite, which was all my budget would stretch to. You know the kind of office building I'm talking about. Worst part of the city, motley characters hanging around the alleys out back. And inside, that faint, what-the-heck-is-that? odor in the stairwell (though you really don't want to know). And the tiny, dusty office itself with the dead aloe vera plant on the window ledge . . .

And here we were, home again.

Yes, we'd moved back. Go figure. The very same office we'd left behind when the success of the Case of the Flashing Fashion Queen allowed us to move into better digs.

Why were we shuffling back into the old place? Economics, of course.

I'd bought Mother's condo from her. Now that she was living full-time in Florida, I couldn't continue to live there rent-free under the pretext of looking after the place. No more use of the BMW, either, since we'd returned it to her in Florida. All of which meant I was no longer able to afford the cushy office with the thick-piled carpet that seemed to bury your feet up to your ankles when you walked through it. (I have calf muscles of steel now.) I even had to return that tweeting, all-in-one copier/printer/fax machine I so loved (I just nipped in under the grace period to rescind the contract). And the voice-changer? It went back, too. I kept the high-tech coffee pot, however. I mean, c'mon — it ground the coffee beans and delivered frothed milk.

The move back to our old digs couldn't have been better timed, though. Business had been dropping off as of late, no doubt due to the dismal economy. Amazing how blind an eye people could turn to philandering spouses during hard times. Divorce was costly for everyone, and not just emotionally. So we didn't mind the decrease in rent that went with the lower class of accommodation. Maybe in this part of town, people who could afford a divorce might be more comfortable

consulting a PI whose offices were a little further removed from their usual spheres. One could only hope.

So yes, Dix Dodd, PI, and Dylan Foreman, PI apprentice, were busy unpacking on this fine, quiet Saturday in October. Unpacking boxes, arranging furniture, blowing up Blow-Up Betty and tucking her into the corner. Amazingly — or perhaps not so amazingly — no other tenant had occupied the office since we'd moved out. I uprighted the aloe vera plant and discovered it was plastic. Huh. It still looked half dead. Now that was realism for you.

We had a couple of mini-bottles of sparkling wine chilling in the mini-fridge (hey, I'm all about class). That had been Dylan's contribution (the fridge, not the wine). I'd bought the bubbly, intending it as a reward for us when we finished the unpacking. Dylan's dark eyes had seemed to grow just a tad darker when he'd seen those little bottles. Probably for the same reason my whole body had flushed hot standing in the liquor store four hours ago when I'd bought them. We'd been dancing around each other since Florida. My logical brain still thought it was a bad idea, but my libido disagreed. So far, Dylan had seemed to be content to let the two Dix's duke it out, but he wasn't above stacking the deck in favor of Lust-Crazed Dix. And he damned well knew which Dix had bought the sparkling wine.

So, as we unpacked that fine Saturday, all was quiet. Even with the sharpened edge of awareness between us, it was fun. All seemed good and right, just as it should be.

When will I ever learn?

Quiet didn't last out the afternoon. Fun escaped out the window (and probably got beat up; I tell you, it's a tough neighborhood). And good and right? Ah, that didn't last out the afternoon either.

Because there came a knock at the door. One that made my intuition tinkle like those little bells they put on the end of pasties tassels — Whoops, sorry. TMI. Let's just say the hair on the back of my neck stood up against my collar.

And then the door opened.

Damn.



I regarded the tall, slightly rumpled man standing in my doorway with astonishment. I rubbed my eyes and looked again. Still there. "Oh, crap."

He strode into my office, letting the door fall closed behind him. "Nice to see you, too, Dixieland."

You guessed it. It was my nemesis, the very last man I expected to see at my door. Well, minus an arrest warrant and handcuffs. Yep, it was none other than Detective Richard Head, of the Marport City PD, known by the unkind, uncouth, and just plain immature as Dickhead.

"*Dickhead?*" I said. "What are *you* doing here?"

He mumbled something unintelligible as he walked through to my office.

Dylan and I followed him into the room. I shot a glance at my desk. Five minutes ago, I'd dumped a box of my personals on my blotter, ready to fire them into the various drawers. I gave a quick scan of the items. No, no tampons. No neatly wrapped maxi pads. What a shame. Dickhead tended to go green around the gills around that kind of stuff.

I turned back to him. "Sorry, I didn't catch what you mumbled. Could you repeat that?"

His jaw worked a minute. Finally, he said, "I need your help." The words were grating, reluctant, and he turned toward my desk, no doubt so he wouldn't have to see the glee in my eyes at his admission.

A quick look at Dylan revealed he was just as astonished as I was. Understandable, considering that it wasn't that long ago that the good detective had been hot and horny to land me in jail for the murder of one of Marport City's rich and famous. I had ultimately solved that case (naturally), saving my ass in the process and causing Detective Head much gnashing of teeth.

Dylan came to stand by me. Was it my imagination, or did he stand a little closer than normal? And was he trying to make himself even taller than his 6' 4"?

"Detective," Dylan said.

"Foreman," Dickhead acknowledged, but he gave Dylan just the briefest of glances before turning his attention away again.

The masculine pissing contest barely registered. I was too busy savoring Dickhead's earlier words. *I need your help.*

"What are you grinning for, Dixieshit?"

I let my smile widen. "Ah, the memories."

With a barely suppressed growl, Detective Head sat. Well, sort of sat. We hadn't gotten around yet to bringing the chairs up from the moving van, so he half leaned/half sat on the edge of my desk. He looked down at the assortment of pens, pencils, odds and ends of makeup ...

“Wow. Why do you have so many pairs of tweezers?” He turned to me with a close and scrutinizing look.

“PI stuff,” I answered hastily, fighting the urge to raise a hand to my upper lip. “Every good PI has at least a couple sets.”

“A couple? Looks like you have a half dozen.”

“Yeah ... well, I’m a damn good PI.”

Dylan, I noticed, was looking a little confused, too. Oh God.

“So what brings you here, Dickhead?” There. That should change the subject.

Except it barely got a rise out of him. That snide smile he habitually wore (well, at least in his interactions with me) was gone. And — unless I was badly mistaken — so was a good bit of the confidence he usually carried. “Like I said before, I need your help, Dix.”

Dix? He wasn’t taking the opportunity to make fun of my name. This had to be serious.

Still, I was suspicious. “*My* help?”

Okay, I’ve had a couple high profile cases, but my specialty is trailing cheating spouses. In fact, that’s how Dickhead and I had met. I’d been trailing him on his ex-wife’s dime. Were they back together, and *he* was suspicious of *her* now? No, that hardly seemed likely. She’d taken him to the cleaners. No way were those two living under the same roof again. In fact, Dickhead had been forced back under his mother’s roof out of economic necessity, last time I checked. (Did I mention divorce was expensive?) Was he seeing someone else and wondering about her fidelity? Or — oh, wait, hold the phone! — maybe it was his mother! Was the old girl seeing someone? Some old gent who seemed a little too smooth and who needed checking out? (Hey, if you knew *my* mother, you’d know I’m not even kidding.)

Dickhead rasped a hand over his chin. I couldn’t help but notice that it was a strong, attractively stubbled chin. (And no, it didn’t do anything for me. But just because I despised the man doesn’t mean I’m blind. Objectively speaking, he’s not a bad looking guy, if you like ’em muscle-bound and lantern-jawed.)

“It’s complicated.” He cleared his throat and inserted a finger beneath his collar to loosen his already loose tie. Man, he looked uneasy. Stressed. Which made me feel uneasy and stressed ... because it was just *killing* me not to mock him.

“You want me to tail some —”

“No!” The clipped word cut me off, and yet he was still unwilling

to elaborate. What was eating at him so?

Dylan cut in, "You're involved with a gang and you —"

"That ain't it either, Foreman."

Dylan and I glanced at each other. Oh, yeah. It was *on*. And it was my turn.

"You lost your badge to a hooker and you need us to track her down!"

Dickhead snorted. "Get real."

I shrugged. Seemed like a pretty real possibility to me.

Dylan's turn: "You ... you found out you have an illegitimate son, and you want us to find him!"

Damn, that was a good one.

"Jesus, Foreman."

I was up again. "You ... you were looking out the window while recovering from a broken leg. And ... and you saw your neighbor across the courtyard acting suspiciously. And now his wife is missing and there's a little dog digging up the flowers and —"

It was Dylan who snorted this time. "That's *Rear Window*, Dix."

Whoops. Hitchcock's best. No wonder it seemed so brilliant.

Dickhead glowered as Dylan and I continued to throw out increasingly ridiculous scenarios at his expense. He clearly wasn't enjoying this as much as we were. In fact, I think it was safe to say he was annoyed. Then again, he wasn't exactly jumping in to enlighten us as to the real reason for his presence, was he now?

And that's when I got it. That's when it really sank in. The guy was *here*, at *my* office. He didn't like me any better than I liked him. This was serious. This was —

"Murder," he said suddenly. "I think someone's been murdered."

I blinked. "You suspect a *murder*?"

His brow furrowed fiercely. "That's what I said, isn't it?"

Testy.

"Why don't you go to the police, then?" Dylan asked, beating me to the punch. "You *are* a cop, after all."

Dickhead cut Dylan a hard look before turning back to me. "It's complicated," he said again. And judging by that look of consternation on his face, I had no doubt of it. "I don't *know* there has been a murder. I only suspect there's been one. I have no proof. No evidence. No motive. And no one willing to come forward."

"Not even you?" I didn't have to work hard to inject the words with incredulity. "You suspect a murder may have taken place, but you're not

willing to come forward?"

He glared at me. And if looks could kill . . . well, I'd not have made it past the third grade, but that's not important right now.

Then something remarkable happened. The light of battle went out in his eyes as he reined himself in. At that, I felt a frisson of unease crawl up my back like a spider. What the hell was going on here?

"No, not even me, Dix." Dickhead heaved an in-for-a-penny sigh. "It's a club. An exclusive and private club that I belong to. Members are dying."

"How many?" Dylan asked.

"Two in the last month. The M.E. called it natural causes, but it's just . . . fishy to me. Feels wrong."

"Did you know the deceased?" I asked.

"Not well. Only by first name and . . . well, not well. But they seemed healthy enough. Not at all sickly."

"Old?"

"Yeah, *old*. About your age, Dix."

Mentally, I punched his shoulder. Hard. Oh, and physically, I did the same. Dickhead had been expecting it. Hadn't even flinched in that *totally worth it* kind of way.

"The point is," he continued, "in both cases, each of these folks was at the club one night, dead the next day. No sign of foul play. But I don't like it."

"Yeah, but without any proof —" Dylan started to say.

"But you feel it in your gut," I interrupted.

It was with serious eyes that Detective Head considered me now. "You know it, Dix. In my gut. I know you do."

He was right. I'd had my share of those niggles and nudges of intuition, and I wasn't foolish enough to imagine I was the only one. Hell, cops were famous for it. Gut instinct, jokes aside.

This was it. This was real. This was a case I'd be taking. And I told Dickhead so.

"You'll need to infiltrate the club," he said.

Here's where I got nervous. "Want to elaborate on what kind of club this is?" I was having visions of needing to wear a neoprene cat suit and leather boots with five-inch heels.

"It's a club. An exclusive . . . club."

Somehow, I didn't think I'd be at a quilting bee. "Right. A club. So you said."

Dickhead scrubbed a hand down his face. "It's a cuddle club."

"I'm sorry, you had your hand over your mouth. It's a *what* club?"

"I said cuddle club. It's a cuddle club!"

"Ha!" I snorted. "Good one."

He wasn't laughing.

"I've heard of those," Dylan said.

"Yeah, well, I've heard of the Great Wall of China and that doesn't mean it's real."

Sa-lam!

Oh, wait, did I say *Great Wall of China*? Er, not so much of a slam, then. How did I screw these things up? I should have said *the Tooth Fairy* or *honor among thieves* or *monogamous men*, but no —

I realized then that both men were just looking at me, obviously waiting for me to say something (preferably something comprehensible this time). I looked at Dickhead then turned back to Dylan. "He's not kidding, is he?"

He wasn't.

Oh boy.

I cringed. Man, did I cringe.

The phone rang in the outer office and Dylan excused himself to go answer it.

I asked Dickhead a few more questions: When did they meet next? Where? What did I need to wear to fit in? I almost choked on his answers, but I took the case anyway.

And I named it Death by Cuddle Club.